



GeauxVote Smart!

Louisiana Citizenship Education Program

Louisiana's Old State Capitol
Museum of Political History
www.sos.la.gov/osc

POLITICAL PARTIES

What are political parties?

A political party is a group of people with similar interests who work together to achieve similar goals by gaining power in government. The word “party” comes from an Anglo-French word “partir,” which means “divide.” George Washington warned Americans that our country would suffer if citizens placed the interests of a political party before the interests and needs of the nation.

The Constitution does not mention political parties. However, the Constitution does provide a system of “checks and balances” to keep “factions,” or parties, from favoring some groups over the interest of others and the good of the country. These checks and balances are the three branches of government—the executive branch which is led by the President of the United States, the legislative branch which passes laws and the judicial branch, or courts, in which citizens and states settle their differences.

Do we need political parties?

The first political parties appeared in the United States while George Washington was president. Throughout most of its history, the United States has had a two party system.

Political parties play an important role in government and provide opportunities for

citizens to participate in the political process. Political parties usually support different issues or take different stands on the same issues. These differences are important because they offer voters a choice and clarify issues for voters. Parties also provide leadership and monitor, or watch, government policies and programs.

Most political parties are alike in that they

- Recruit and nominate candidates for public offices
- Educate the public about candidates' stands on important issues
- Organize to help their candidates win elections
- Safeguard the public interest by monitoring the actions of officeholders

What are third parties?

Sometimes a smaller party gains enough support to challenge the two major parties. Often, these “third parties” unite behind one candidate or issue. However, these smaller parties rarely win national elections. Third parties are important because they sometimes speak for groups the major parties do not represent and introduce ideas the two major parties may not address.

Activities

1. Select a third party that is active in the United States today. Research its candidates, issues and success.
2. Design a platform for two or three parties with issues that are important to young people. Hold a mock election among the parties. Analyze the results.

Louisiana Connection

According to the Louisiana Secretary of State's Voter Registration Web site, five political parties are registered to participate in Louisiana elections. Investigate:

1. Visit the Louisiana Secretary of State [Voter Registration](#) Web site and find out which parties are registered with the Secretary of State's Office.
2. What issues or ideas does each party support?
3. Complete the [Louisiana Political Parties Chart](#) to find out what these parties have in common and how they are different.
4. Which political party supports the issues that are important to you?
5. Do you have to belong to one of these parties to vote? Explore the Louisiana Secretary of State's [Voter Registration](#) Web site to find the answer.
6. If a new political party wanted to register in Louisiana, what would they need to do? What information would they have to provide? Explore the Louisiana Secretary of State's [Elections](#) Web site to find the answer.



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LESSON PLAN

Grade Levels	Elementary, middle and high school
Time	Adapt to meet needs
Overview	The introductory reading and supporting activities encourage classroom conversation and investigation about how political parties are important to our country. Teachers are encouraged to adapt the materials and activities to meet the needs, grade level and interests of their students.
Focus Question	Why are political parties important to citizens and to our country?
Materials	Political Parties reading
Preparation	Make copies of the reading, one per student

Benchmarks

Seventh Grade

- Describe the role of political parties in the American political system (C-1B-M6)

Eighth Grade

- Explain how political parties, campaigns, and elections provide opportunities for citizens to participate in government (C-1B-M6)

High School Civics

- Describe various forms of political participation (C-1D-H3)
- Describe the importance of political leadership to American society, and identify ways in which citizens can exercise leadership (C-1D-H4)

Vocabulary

1. checks and balances
2. executive branch
3. issues
4. judicial branch
5. legislative branch
6. monitor
7. political party
8. third parties



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